

FROM DREAM TO NIGHTMARE: GUN VIOLENCE IN AMERICA

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Abstract

Following the horrific school shooting on February 14, 2018 in Parkland, Florida, a student-led movement erupted that led to massive marches around the globe. This speech was delivered by Sami Rahamim, a student in the Carlson School of Management at the University of Minnesota, at the *March For Our Lives* rally in St. Paul, Minnesota, on March 24, 2018 to an estimated crowd of 20,000 people. Rahamim offers a partnership approach that is based on deep listening and mutual respect to address the gun violence crisis in America.

Keywords: Gun violence prevention, student-led movements, March For Our Lives

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Good morning. Five and a half years ago, my family joined a club we never asked to be a part of.

Like many of you, I was in high school. It was my senior year at St. Louis Park High. I played soccer, was an editor on the school newspaper, and was in the process of applying to colleges. After finishing a round of applications, I went off to Madison for the weekend to visit a friend.

My mom dropped me off to take the 4:00 PM Megabus to Madison. Shortly after the bus started out, I started seeing tweets reporting on a shooting in the Bryn Mawr neighborhood in Minneapolis, where my family's business, Accent Signage, is located.

I sent those reports to my dad, asking him to be safe as the police were advising residents to stay indoors. But as the details trickled in, it became clear that my world was about to change forever.

That day, after weeks of poor performance, the company was letting a 13-year employee go. In a managers' office to collect his final paycheck, the employee pulled out a handgun and started shooting. He shot seven fathers, killing six, including mine.

My father was an immigrant from Israel, so I called him the Hebrew word for dad: Aba. Aba came to the US at exactly the age I am now: 22. Having grown up on a farm in southern Israel, he didn't have much formal education. And when he arrived here in the States, his English was very limited.

So Aba worked odd jobs, learned English, took some technical classes, and developed an interest in engraving. After several years of tinkering, he finally broke through by creating a method for producing braille signage that had the potential to be better than anything else in the market at the time.

He opened Accent Signage in 1984 and doggedly worked to grow his company, while bringing others up the ladder with him. After almost 30 years in business, he could not have been prouder of his success. His braille patent was licensed in countries on every continent, and he was regarded as a leader in the local small business community, even serving on Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak's green business council. He loved his work, had a great family, and gave back to his community. There was little doubt that he was living the American Dream.

But in an instant, with one pull of the trigger, he would be murdered in the very place he was so proud to have built. Since that horrific instant, my family lives the uniquely American *Nightmare*. We have joined the scores of American families who live each and every day with a gaping hole in our lives. This May, I will graduate from the U. It tears me apart to know that he won't be there. It's the same pain my sister felt on her wedding day two years ago, and every milestone that we'll cross for the rest of our lives.

Not a day goes by that this pain doesn't wash over survivors of gun violence in some form or another. It is a needless pain, a senseless trauma, that time mends - but never truly heals.

The first couple months after the incident were a blur. I had a hard time returning to classes at St. Louis Park, participating in extracurricular activities, and feeling like any of it mattered. But my memory becomes much more clear after December 14, 2012 - less than 3 months after the incident at Accent - when 20 children and six of their educators were murdered in the sanctity of their elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut.

Similar to the moment we are in now, it seemed our state and nation was *finally* going to reckon with its utter inability to keep its citizens safe from gun violence - and that our inadequate gun laws would be addressed. As a 17-year-old who had just had his life upended by gun violence, I felt a responsibility to use my voice in order to change the culture and change our laws to prevent this from happening to more families.

So I see a familiar part of myself in the courageous teens using their voices to grab our nation's attention and give our elected officials the desperately needed wake-up

call that the status quo cannot continue. Our representatives who work in the building behind me and in Washington need to hear us loud and clear: We will not accept this violence in our schools. We will not accept this violence in our workplaces. We will not accept this violence in our houses of worship. And we will not accept this violence in our streets.

We *all* have the responsibility to act in order to address this horrendous problem in our country. Thirty-three Americans are killed every single day in incidents of gun violence. So while mass shootings like Newtown and Parkland, horrific as they are, galvanize us to raise our voices and call for change, we must recognize that nearly *two* Parklands take place every single day in America, just spread out by time and geography. Including suicides, nearly 100 Americans lose their lives to gun violence every single day. That is a bargain which our generation has proven we will no longer accept.

And while we must act, we also must listen. Let us listen to the voices of youth in communities of color who are disproportionately impacted by gun violence. Listen to folks in Greater Minnesota where gun violence is more prevalent in the form of suicide. And listen to lawful and responsible gun owners who want to be part of the solution.

The US is the only nation of its kind that suffers from such an epidemic of gun violence. We know there are steps we can take to make us safer. And we know that more guns is not the answer. If it were, we would be the safest nation on Earth.

So it's incumbent upon all of us to say Not One More_ - that we will march, write, speak, protest, and **vote**, until we achieve a reality where we can truly feel safe.

Change will not come overnight. And this march - this day of action - must not be the end, but rather, the beginning, of a new day. A safer day, *free from gun violence*, where each and every life is valued more than the profits of gun manufacturers. If this march is any indication, I have hope that day is near.

Thank you to all of the student leaders who helped organize this march, to our partner organizations, Moms Demand Action and Protect Minnesota, for your support, to our allies in the legislature and in Congress who are amplifying youth and survivor voices, and to all of you for rising up, joining this movement, and raising your voices to protest our nation's gun violence epidemic. Let us take this movement to the voting booths this November and say loud and clear: enough is enough.

Thank you.

Sami Rahamim is an advocate for gun violence prevention in Minnesota. Sami's father, Reuven Rahamim, was killed in September 2012 at his business in Minneapolis. Five other fathers were also killed during the incident, which was the deadliest workplace shooting in state history. Sami graduated from the University of Minnesota in 2018 with a B.S.B. degree in public and nonprofit management.

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